Spanish Version(Español)

Parish Resource - Fr. Ian Bozant

Why Should I Confess My Sins to a Priest?

by Rev. Ian M. Bozant
Archdiocese of New Orleans

In a modern American mindset, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on privacy. As such, the idea of confessing one's sins to another person can seem odd or even unnecessary. Often, the most common argument against this idea is that Almighty God knows all things and desires all people to approach him in prayer, so it seems sufficient to simply confess one's sins and beg for forgiveness in private prayer. While venial sin may, in fact, be forgiven in many ways, the Catholic Church teaches that it is necessary to confess one's mortal sins to a priest in the Sacrament of Penance in order to receive forgiveness from God. This teaching is based on our fundamental reality as human beings, on Sacred Scripture, and on a knowledge of sin's personal and communal effects.

Many will point to the following passage from Scripture as a rebuttal of the Catholic Church's position: "For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all" (1 Tm 2:5-6). Why, then, should one approach an additional mediator—a priest—in order to receive forgiveness? The answer here is that the priest is not an additional mediator; rather, he is the agent of the one mediator as he stands in the person of Christ in confession. It is our Blessed Lord who forgives sins in and through the person of the priest. Even so, Christ as the sole mediator and as the Son of God has the divine prerogative to choose how he wishes to mediate his plan of salvation and forgiveness to the world. Christ, as the sole mediator, chooses to use others in the accomplishment of his work in the person of the priest.

One might say on a very natural level that one of the reasons our Blessed Lord chose to institute confession this way is because we are human. Often, a very important part of the healing process comes in being able to name our transgression and fault and then expressing that to others. Bringing forth these hidden faults and sins into the light of Christ's mercy has an essential role in the healing that our Blessed Lord wishes to offer. Additionally, one often finds a great deal of comfort in verbalizing these faults to another and hearing the words of forgiveness pronounced by the lips of another person. Almighty God recognizes our humanity and our need for communion with others and thus institutes the Sacrament of Penance to accord with our human nature and needs.

More importantly, the Scriptures themselves illustrate that our Blessed Lord gave to his Apostles the power to forgive sins: “When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [Jesus] said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’” (Jn 20:20-23). Thus, very clearly, one can see the specific charge our Blessed Lord gave his Apostles to forgive the sins of others, but they were unable to do this on their own, which is why he sent the Holy Spirit upon them. It is remarkable to note here that this is only one of two passages that illustrate Almighty God breathing upon man, with the other being God breathing on man at creation (see Gn 2:7), illustrating the importance of the Sacrament of Penance. But this charge to the Apostles to forgive the sins of others is not restricted only to them. Our Blessed Lord intended for this charge to continue throughout the ages and be carried out by the successors to the Apostles (see Mt 28:9-20) so that Christ’s offer of forgiveness would be available to all people. Few would deny that the command found in Matthew 28 to baptize all nations would be restricted only to the Apostles, even though they are the ones being spoken to in the passage. Likewise, this power to forgive or retain sins is a part of the apostolic office and is an instrument of the Church to remit or retain sins committed after Baptism. Thus, the priest shares in the mission of Christ’s own redemptive work without replacing him as the one mediator between God and man. Here, one might ask why the person of the priest is necessary or what our Blessed Lord’s motivation was when he instituted the Sacrament of Penance.

In Pope John Paul II’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, he elaborates on the notion of sin and its effects. First and foremost, sin has a profound effect upon the sinner: “As a personal act, sin has its first and most important consequences in the sinner himself: that is, in his relationship with God, who is the very foundation of human life; and also in his spirit, weakening his will and clouding his intellect” (Pope John Paul II, Reconciliation and Penance [Reconciliatio et Paenitentia (RP)] [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003], no. 16). However, this personal aspect of sin is not its only effect. Throughout the writings of St. Paul, the truth that each baptized person is a member of the Body of Christ is repeated over and over again (see 1 Cor 12:12-31; Col 1:18; 2:18-20; Eph 1:22-23; 3:19; 4:13, etc.). Members of one Body, the graces and victories won by one member redound to the glory of all the members; however, the converse is also true. When one member of the Body sins, the other members are effected. The most obvious way sin affects others is when that sin is clearly directed toward another: slander, murder, theft, etc. Pope John Paul II also points out that sin has a social effect in more subtle ways than these though: “To speak of social sin means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others. . . . In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family” (RP, no. 16). Thus, each and every sin in some way affects the whole Body of Christ.

It is precisely this truth that can help one understand the need to confess one's sins to a priest. Certainly, the priest stands in the Person of Christ offering the forgiveness of Almighty God to the penitent in accord with our Lord's command in the Gospel of John discussed earlier. But the priest himself does not lose his humanity or his membership in the Body of Christ when he hears the confession of penitents and pronounces the words of absolution. Thus, the priest is a representative of the Church and functions on behalf of God as well. In this way, the priest can reconcile the penitent with God himself, who has been offended by the sins confessed, but the priest can also reconcile the penitent with the Church, whose members have, in some mystical way, been effected by those same sins. Recognizing the truth of one's membership in the Body of Christ, the penitent should desire to make amends in some way for the effect that sin has had on the fellow members of the Body of Christ. Confessing one's sins to the priest satisfies this demand of true contrition and sets the penitent back in right relationship with God and his holy Church.

Often, many object to the notion of confessing one's sins to another person. People feel uncomfortable and ashamed telling others of the wrongs they have committed, but, in some sense, this is appropriate. Each person guilty of sin should be ashamed, at least in some way, of his or her transgression and feel some sorrow for the sins he or she has committed. This helps to prepare the penitent's soul for the forgiveness of Almighty God and is in itself a grace leading the soul back to right relationship with our Blessed Lord, which should be a source of great consolation! There may always be some sense of trepidation and fear when one approaches the confessional, but with great humility, the priest opens the doors of God's mercy to the contrite penitent, filling the soul with grace and repairing the bond with Almighty God and his Church that was damaged by sin.

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